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STATINTL

Politics and People

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Super Secret Goof

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Almost by acclamation, the nomination for goathood in the Cuban contretemps has been awarded to the Central Intelligence Agency, the big, silent organization upon which the White House relies for information. Unlike some earlier occasions when accusing fingers have been pointed in its direction, the present criticism appears to carry considerable merit.

Under question is why the agency, deeply involved as it was, permitted the Cuban patriots to herald a limited landing as an imminent major invasion to the consequent enhancement of the prestige of Fidel Castro and the embarrassment before the world of the United States, and why it was misled into forecasting a popular uprising on the island that would sweep Castro out of his dictatorship.

Explanations in detail might temper the prevailing judgment that the CIA fell into a majestic blunder. Unfortunately for the agency, the nature of its assigned task is espionage, and espionage permits no acknowledgment that it exists.

President Eisenhower put it succinctly at the laying of the cornerstone of the new CIA building in suburban Virginia. He said then: "Success of this agency cannot be advertised, failure cannot be explained." In time the supersecret agency may be able to spread discreetly its version of the miscarriage, but the current climate is heavy with uneasiness over the unparalleled exemption from supervision and questioning that shields its operations. Some legislators have long been disturbed by this anomaly in a government of checks and balances.

Even the hundreds of millions in funds appropriated to and spent by the Central Intelligence Agency are a mystery. A secret known only to the top men at CIA, the President, a few in the Budget Bureau, and half a dozen members of the appropriations committees of the House and Senate, its appropriations are hidden in the provisions for other branches of the Government. The funds for the U-2 spy planes, operated by the CIA, turned out for example to have been appropriated for weather observation.

All of this was intentional when the CIA was created by statute in 1949.

Until then, the United States was alone among major powers in having no peacetime espionage service. The idea had been looked upon with repugnance in this country, so much so that in 1929 a Secretary of State disbanded the decoding staff in his department because "gentlemen do not read other people's mail."

Organized espionage on a year in and year out basis had been the practice abroad since the sixteenth century, when the rivalries of England, France and the Holy Roman Empire produced the establishment by the great powers of permanent embassies with ambassadors who collected information for their sovereigns. Military and naval attachés were added in time and these came to be regarded as licensed spies, soon augmented by clandestine spying networks. At the time of the Civil War the United States was so lacking in information resources that Lincoln delegated the work for two years to the Pinkerton Detective Agency.

Pearl Harbor changed the American outlook. When the law setting up the Central Intelligence Agency was passed, the purpose was described as the prevention of an atomic Pearl Harbor. Sections of the law prescribed that it was to distill data gathered by itself and other agencies of the Government and from these to produce "national intelligence estimates" on the potential and probable intent of other powers for the guidance of the nation's policymakers.

An additional catch-all section, providing for such other related activities as were found advisable, turned out to be the authority under which the CIA has ranged far, sometimes into apparent mischiefmaking. Arguments among the several Cuban refugee organizations prior to the unhappy venture into overthrowing Castro revealed that the CIA was financing their activities. It was deep in the coup d'état that ousted a Communist regime in Guatemala, and was on the spot when revolt turned out the maniac Mohammed Mossadegh rule in Iran. Saboteurs are part of its personnel.

Somewhat oddly, there is a great deal more awareness of the CIA abroad than at home. In part, this is because the authorizing statute specifically defines its police powers and any part in internal security, the province of the FBI. In greater measure, however, the CIA made itself known in a far lands by an early tendency to extravagance in its operations, now curbed, and by clumsiness and transparency in some of its cloak and dagger ventures.

At bottom, the disquiet about the agency turns on the self-evident proposition that the estimates it gives the policymakers can be only as good as the information and the judgments that go into them. The quality of both is brought into question by the inadequate performance on the Cuban coast.